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Special Report

Six Months of Postelection Turmoil in India

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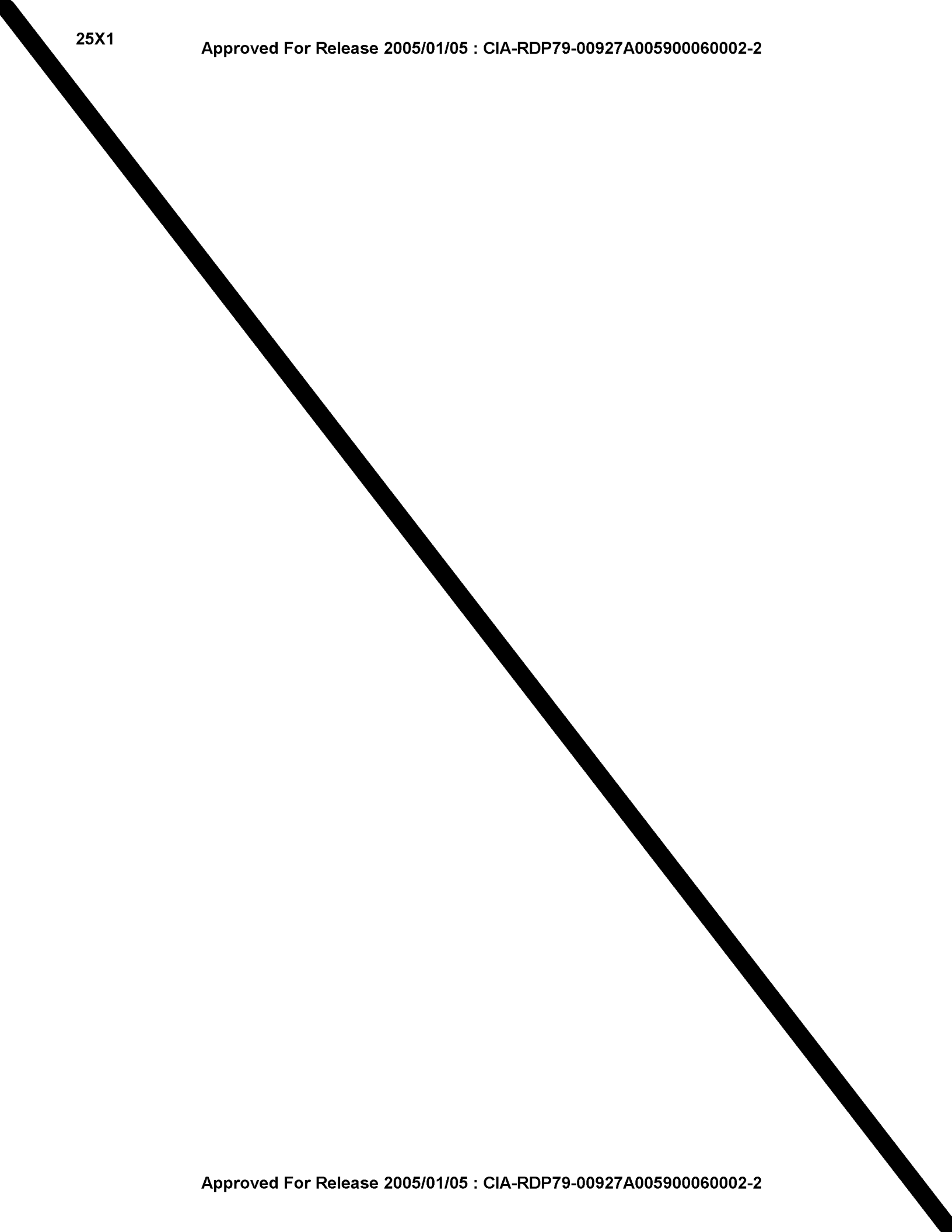

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SIX MONTHS OF POSTELECTION TURMOIL IN INDIA

India is going through a difficult period of political adjustment brought on by last February's elections. This fourth general election in 20 years of independence demonstrated the vitality of the country's democratic institutions, but at the same time it created a fundamentally changed political atmosphere and introduced a host of new problems for the smooth functioning of those institutions. The Congress Party monolith, which has dominated the political scene, was badly shaken, although not shattered. To date, the Congress has done little to resolve its numerous problems.

For the first time since independence in 1947, the combined parliamentary opposition has almost enough votes to bring down the Congress government in New Delhi. In the states, political instability is more acute. Several of the nine states now governed by non-Congress regimes are shaky coalitions and these as well as some of the eight states still under Congress rule face uncertain political futures.

The Congress Party

The Congress Party, despite its decline at the polls last February, continues to be the most important single influence in Indian politics. Over the years, however, the party has suffered increasingly from factionalism, corruption, and excessive self-seeking. Combined with widespread economic distress, these factors have undermined the ruling party's once almost unassailable position and exposed it to telling attacks by its emboldened opposition.

The Congress organization, moreover, is no longer the only political vehicle through which aspiring young politicians can successfully seek power. This circumstance, in the absence of a sharp ideological or programmatic appeal, has further reduced the cohesiveness of a party whose main attraction for many politicians had become its power to punish and reward.

Immediately following the elections the badly battered Congress leadership moved quickly to head off an impending struggle between incumbent Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her chief rival, Morarji Desai, the septuagenarian leader of the party's conservative wing. Mrs. Gandhi retained the prime ministership, while Desai took the title of deputy prime minister and

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got the finance portfolio. The two have been able to work together without much friction, but Desai appears to be playing a waiting game and, if given the opportunity, will almost certainly make another bid for the top job.

Despite this moderately good beginning, the party's leadership thus far has failed to produce a program that might rebuild its popular following or dispel the cynicism that has crept into the organization's ranks.

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Congress Committee (AICC)--the main policy-endorsing body--met in late June. Public discussion during the three-day conclave revealed a considerable amount of restlessness among the some 660 AICC members. A widening gulf was evident between the rank-and-file AICC members--including some who hold important positions in the Congress parliamentary delegation--and the high command.

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The growing ferment in the party's upper echelons indicates that further discontent will be registered at the next AICC meeting this fall when a new party president will be nominated and at the annual party convention next January. Some younger generation politicians appear skeptical of the top leaders' time-worn slogans. Moreover, several of the old-guard Congress leaders--including Kamaraj and other party bosses--were deprived of their political bases in the elections and important shifts in the relative strengths of Congress state units have taken place.

Mrs. Gandhi's position within the party was greatly strengthened when the Congress candidate she backed for the Indian presidency, against Kamaraj's advice, won a thumping victory. That advantage,

however, may be only temporary. She may be able to push through the election of some willing tool to the party presidency, but she could also find herself seriously challenged by dissatisfied elements. Thus far her efforts to sit in both camps have been largely unsuccessful.

The Central Government

Mrs. Gandhi's new government in New Delhi has been constantly harassed by the strengthened opposition parties. Thus far, however, the failure of these ideologically disparate parties to coalesce has prevented them from seriously challenging the government's stability. Nevertheless, if some catalytic issue were to deepen divisions within the loosely structured Congress parliamentary delegation, the government could conceivably be brought down and the country plunged into another nationwide election--the results of which would be uncertain.

During the initial short inaugural session of parliament (18 March-8 April) the opposition parties, still fresh from their election victories, were able to make fairly convincing gestures toward solidarity out of a common desire to embarrass and hopefully to overthrow the weakened Congress regime. The outcome of the indirect presidential election in early May--which turned into a showdown of opposition solidarity versus Congress cohesiveness--shattered this image. The Congress candidate, incumbent Vice President Zakhir Husain, received votes from some opposition elements in addition to solid Congress backing.

On the other hand, the divisiveness of the opposition has not prevented the individual parties--sometimes in concert--from seeking every opportunity to distract and embarrass the government. The current session of parliament has been marked by a continuing critical onslaught from the opposition benches. Not all of this criticism has been unrealistic or negative in content, although it seems to have had little constructive effect. Most of the government's energy has been spent on responding to its attackers, rather than taking fresh initiatives.

Despite strains within the Congress parliamentary group--about 55 percent of the members of the lower house--there is no evidence of impending large-scale defections. For Congress members of parliament, defection from the party still has little attraction. Given the disarray of the opposition parties, the largest of which still has less than one sixth the number of seats held by Congress, defection does not mean power in a non-Congress coalition regime--as it has in some of the states--but rather a confused situation that might well lead to an unwanted new election.

For the first time since independence the Congress government in New Delhi has had to deal with a group of state governments controlled by other parties. Even

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when the Congress monopolized political power in both New Delhi and virtually all the states, the central government was often hard pressed to achieve nationwide consensus in vital areas where responsibilities are shared under the constitution--most notably food and economic development policies. Thus far the installation of non-Congress governments in over half the states has not significantly worsened center-state relations. Nevertheless, some of these regimes have been quick to blame their problems on New Delhi. The inherent problems of any federal form of government remain and are accentuated by sharply diverse regional interests.

The State Governments

Opposition to the Congress Party is growing throughout India. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the eight states where anti-Congress governments now are in power.* Several of these states (see map) have popular but unstable coalitions of parties united only by mutual hostility toward Congress. Some states still under Congress rule also face uncertain political futures and could leave the Congress column if fair-weather Congress state legislators find tempting opportunities to work with strengthened non-Congress parties to form governments in which they can play a larger role.

The postelection period has already seen several radical shifts in governing authority in the states and new changes appear to be in the making. Thus far the most disruptive struggle for control of a state legislature and the only case in which New Delhi has been forced to intervene has been in Rajasthan.

Last February's elections did not produce a majority for any single party in the Rajasthan assembly, although Congress emerged as the largest party, winning 89 of the 184 seats. Both the long-time Congress chief minister, Mohan Lal Sukhadia, and the leader of a combined opposition grouping, however, claimed a majority. The state governor, an old-time Congress party hack, finally called on Sukhadia to form the government. This precipitated violent demonstrations which led New Delhi to impose direct rule on the state. Direct rule from New Delhi was lifted on 26 April and Sukhadia finally was able to muster a thin majority in the legislature and form a government.

The Rajasthan opposition parties now appear resigned to playing a waiting game. Although Sukhadia appears to have strengthened his position in recent weeks, his government still faces extremely difficult political and economic problems, and there is a legacy of popular discontent from

**The ninth non-Congress government is in Nagaland, which did not hold a state election last February and has been governed since 1964 by a party which has cooperated with the Congress government in New Delhi.*

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the postelection maneuverings. Should the Sukhadia regime stumble, the opposition would almost certainly take advantage of any opportunity to topple the unpopular Congress regime and perhaps plunge Rajasthan into further disorders.

Two other radical shifts in state politics occurred in rapid succession. The apparently solid Congress regime in Hariana collapsed on 17 March when the leader of an important caste group deserted the Congress government in protest against the chief minister's cabinet selections. About two weeks later, on 1 April, the Congress-imposed government in neighboring Uttar Pradesh--the most populous state and long a citadel of Congress strength--also fell because of defections. The collapse of these governments--both replaced by shaky but popular coalitions--was triggered by deep-rooted factional discord largely unrelated to ideological and policy considerations.

Until the February elections, nonideological factionalism was largely contained by the Congress high command in New Delhi. The central leadership, comfortably shielded by overwhelming majorities had enough leverage to work out compromises between competing state factions. Now deprived of much of that leverage, the high command is unable to impose restraints.

Factionalism poses an ever-present threat to the long-run stability of several of the state governments still in Congress hands, as well as being a major factor inhibiting the party's return to power in some states. The Congress governments of Mysore, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh are all threatened with factional problems that could ultimately bring them down. In Mysore--long a safe state for Congress--the government is now operating with an uncomfortably reduced majority and must contend with the machinations of a new "United Opposition Front." In Gujarat, a local dispute over the location of a new university has sparked some defections from the Congress state organization. Here, however, the strengthened opposition is not yet united and, although the Congress majority is paper thin, the stability of the government has not been affected.

The factional threat in Madhya Pradesh is more immediate. Here the Congress government avoided a test of strength on 20 July only by proroguing the state assembly. The clever and ruthless Congress chief minister, D. P. Mishra, a staunch supporter of Mrs. Gandhi, now is going about the business of rebuilding a comfortable majority before the assembly reconvenes. The situation is fluid, however, because of the many floor crossings in both directions and the outcome could have important ramifications in New Delhi.

Political instability is also a continuing threat in several of the states which have come under non-Congress rule. The only exceptions are the regionalist regime in Madras, the conservative Swatantra-led government in Orissa,

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and the coalition in Kerala dominated by the radical left Communists (CPI/L). In all the other new non-Congress state coalitions, internal strains are surfacing which could break some or all of them apart. Congress might be able to pick up the pieces in some instances, but fresh elections and even direct rule from New Delhi would probably be necessary in other places.

Troubled West Bengal

Currently the most acute state problem is teeming West Bengal, where the elections led to a United Front (UF) coalition government--headed by the leader of a rebel Congress group but including 13 other parties ranging from the CPI/L to right-wing independents. Based on common opposition to long years of Congress misrule rather than on shared ideologies or even objectives, the UF has provided a weak regime that has accentuated the endemic lawlessness of the state.

Even in the best of times, West Bengal is plagued by communal problems, labor agitation, agrarian discontent, tribal uprisings, food shortages, and general economic malaise. The permissiveness of the new UF government, however, has caused a precipitous decline in law and order in many areas--especially in populous Calcutta and in the strategic Naxalbari area.

Despite its failings the UF coalition retains considerable popularity with the volatile Bengali masses. Long years of Congress misrule and corruption have discredited the former ruling party. Despite Congress claims to have won over enough votes in the state legislature to topple the UF, party bosses probably fear that such a move would produce widespread violent popular reaction.

The central government is reluctant to intervene for the same reason. New Delhi, however, also is concerned with the economic and military implications. West Bengal's port of Calcutta and its industrial complex are vital to the Indian economy. In addition, the state has a long and partly disputed border with East Pakistan, and its narrow northern area--the so-called Siliguri gap--is the lifeline to about one third of the Indian Army (roughly 200,000 combat troops). (See map on next page.)

Particularly worrisome to New Delhi is a peasant and tribal revolt incited by an extremist rebel group of radical left Communists in the Naxalbari vicinity.

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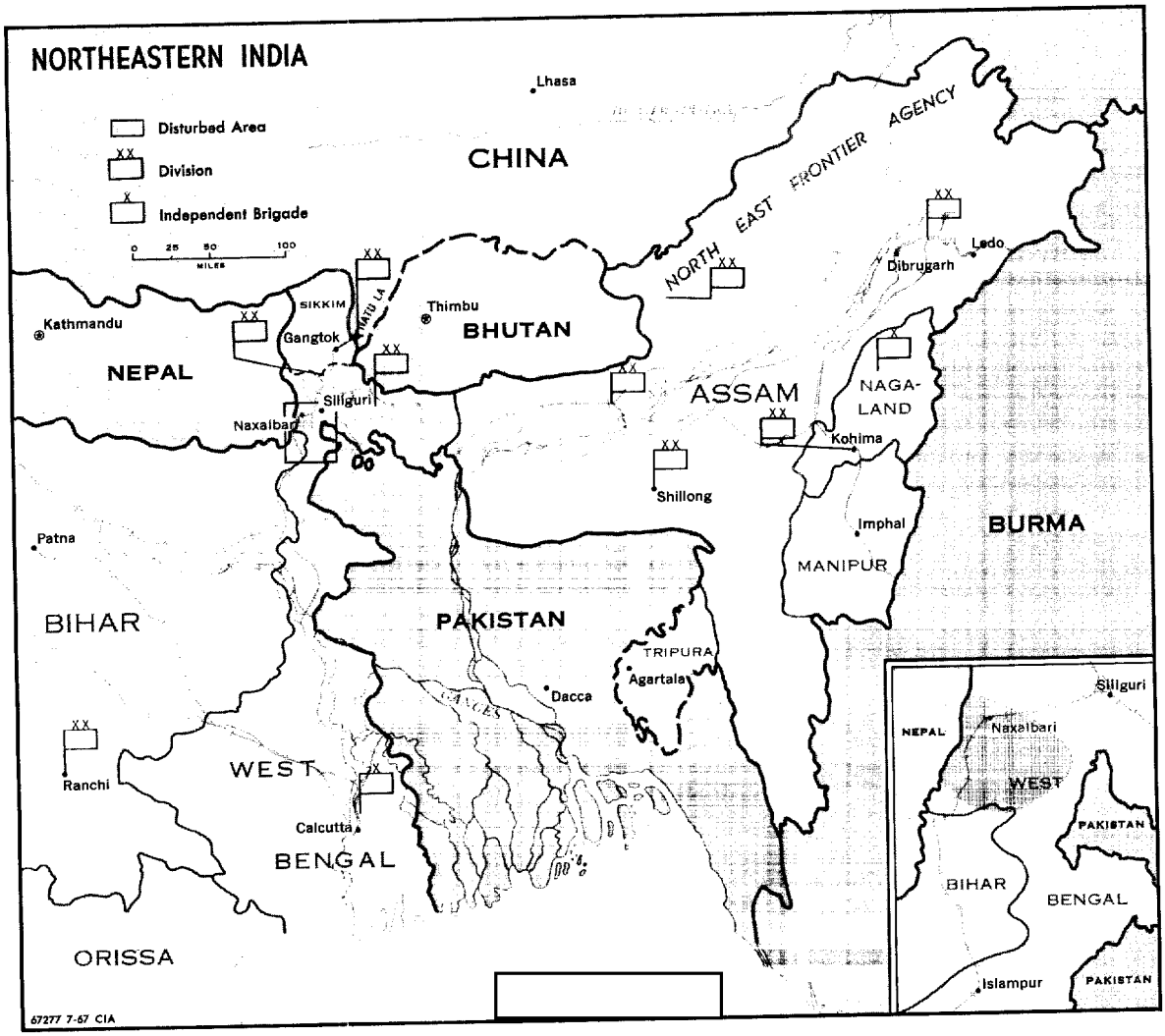
Disaffection with the tactics of the CPI/L--the largest element in the UF--has several times brought the coalition to the brink of collapse. The CPI/L itself is increasingly torn between remaining in the coalition and risking the possible breakup of the party by growing extremist elements favoring more revolutionary tactics, or withdrawing and seeing the UF collapse.

Prospects

After two decades of stable government under the political dominance of the Congress Party, India has entered a period in which its democratic institutions are coming under increasing strain. Political instability has thus far been limited to some of the states, but the threat of similar problems also exists for the central government.



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The Congress Party has been seriously weakened in parliament, but with opposition strength scattered among parties with widely differing attitudes, programs, and sources of support, there is still no effective challenger. If the Congress government in New Delhi were to fall, new elections and an era of shifting and unstable coalitions could follow.

In the states, new shifts in governing authority--perhaps accompanied by periods of direct rule from New Delhi and indecisive midterm elections--are in the making. Breakdowns in orderly government--such as was the case in Rajasthan and currently is the situation in West Bengal--are possible.

Unless the Congress Party comes up with a more creative effort to refurbish its tarnished popular image than it has since the elections, it will be unable convincingly to meet the rising crescendo of opposition criticism.

The sacred aura that the party derived from leading the independence movement has worn off and the new generation of Indian voters is more interested in current results than in historic achievements.

India's current political problems need not necessarily lead to a breakdown of its democratic system. Economic distress--the ultimate source of much of the country's political problems--has been accentuated by the failure of two successive monsoons. A good monsoon this year, combined with progressive economic policies, could relieve much of the current sense of frustration and dissent that pervades the body politic. Moreover, the Indian people, including the armed forces and the pragmatic politicians, have a considerable measure of loyalty to and pride in their democratic institutions. [redacted]

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